

Study Guide to Marilynne Robinson's novels, *Home* and *Gilead*,
written by Dr. Catherine E. Saunders

Robinson's publisher has posted a reading group guide designed for a general audience at <http://us.macmillan.com/home#guides> (the link to the PDF file containing the guide is at the very bottom of the page; I also recommend the selection from the *Paris Review*, linked nearer to the top of the page, which includes an extended interview with Robinson). The questions in this guide are intended to supplement what the publisher has done by suggesting additional discussion topics appropriate for Christian Education classes, book clubs, or other groups interested in focusing on the religious themes in *Home*, alone or in conjunction with *Gilead*.

Questions particular to *Home*

What theological meanings do Rev. Boughton's home, family, church, and larger community hold for him? In what ways are his beliefs challenged and/or strengthened by his experiences with each?

What sense do you get of what Boughton was like as a pastor? What themes were common in his sermons? What other pastoral activities do we hear about him performing? In what roles, and with what groups of people, do you suspect he was most and least effective as a pastor? Why?

How are the religious beliefs and/or practices of Jack, Glory, and the other Boughton children (to the extent we learn of them) similar to and/or different from Boughton's? What, if anything, seems to account for the differences?

At one point in the novel, Glory remarks that "the girls in this family got named for theological abstractions, and the boys got named for human beings." In what ways, if any, does this naming pattern reflect the relative roles of men and women in the Boughton family? How do these roles shape Jack's relationship with Della, and Glory's with her fiancé? Later, we learn that Boughton originally wanted to name Glory Charity (in the sense of love -- *agape* or *caritas*), but was overruled by his wife. In what way(s) does each name fit Glory?

Glory reflects that, if she had been a man, she might have become a pastor. What sense do we get of what she would have been like in this role? How might her approach to her vocation have been different from or similar to her father's? How does her chosen profession of teaching compare?

What explanations – theological and otherwise -- do Jack, his father, Glory, Ames and others offer for Jack's actions and experiences? Might we, given 21st-century understandings of addiction and other mental illnesses, add any others? How, finally, would you describe Jack, as a father, a son, a brother, a moral being? Does Jack's own suggestion that he is "an instance of predestination," one among a group of "people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell" seem plausible to you? Why or why not? What about the idea that parents' sins are sometimes visited on their children, as in the case of the first child born to David and Bathsheba?

What role do other Biblical stories of fathers and/or sons – the parable of the prodigal son; the story of Cain and Abel; the relationships among Isaac, Jacob, and Esau – play in the novel? In what ways are relationships in the novel like and unlike those in each of these stories?

As Jack points out, slavery and racial segregation can be seen as failures of American Christianity. Why do you think Robinson chose to include this theme in the novel? How would the story, Jack's situation, and/or our understanding of the causes of his situation be different if Della were white, and/or interracial relationships were accepted in Gilead, the Boughton family, and/or the U.S. as a whole?

Questions drawing on both *Home* and *Gilead*

How do Boughton's and Ames' relationships with the town of Gilead differ? What theological meaning, if any, does the town hold for each of them? How do their ancestors' experiences shape their relationships to the town?

How do Boughton's and Ames' personal histories shape and reflect their theologies? How does each man's experience with his own parents, grandparents, sibling, spouse(s) and/or children shape his understanding of the other's family? What, if any, differences are there in the two men's theological outlooks?

In what ways were Boughton and Ames similar and/or different as pastors? What do we know about their sermons? the people who were most likely to seek them out for counsel? the roles in which they were most and least effective? Which would you rather have for a pastor and why?

How are Boughton and Ames similar and/or different as fathers? Can you see parallels between their approaches to fatherhood and the ministry?

What role does Lila play in each book? How is she like and unlike Glory, Della, Ames' and Boughton's mothers, and the other female figures we meet? How does each experience the role of pastor's wife and/or daughter? What other identities does each embrace?

How does Jack as seen through Ames' eyes in *Gilead* differ from Jack as seen through Glory's eyes in *Home*? What do we know from either book about Ames' understanding of the causes of Jack's behavior? How does Ames' family history with the abolitionist movement shape, and change, his understanding of Jack and his situation?

How would *Gilead* be different if the final two conversations between Ames and Jack were omitted? How would *Home* be different if Della's visit, and the earlier references to the civil rights movement, were omitted? Which book would be most significantly changed by such omissions? How do the themes of slavery, segregation, and Christians' roles in challenging or perpetuating racism tie in with the other themes of each book?

Ames ends *Gilead* by articulating his hopes for his son: "I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful." What hopes does Boughton have for his children, collectively and individually? How are his hopes similar to and/or different from Ames'?

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